

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 1st April 2018
Mark 16: 1 - 8

In the opening lines of his book about science and the arts called *Unweaving the Rainbow* the author Professor Richard Dawkins writes this,

We are all going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here.

If you want to learn to write well then you could do little better than study this short paragraph of 108 words written by Professor Dawkins. It's structure, grammar and content make not just a fine piece of writing, but a moving on, and one filled with more meaning in those 108 words than you might find in 10008 words. Here it is again,

We are all going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here.

These words are a celebration of life. Their sentiment isn't perfect; there are of-course those in this world who for any number of reasons would have preferred not to have been born, and they should be respected for that. But, if the thought of death is something that has ever hypnotized your life with worry or fear then this passage with its elegant sentiment has the power tears your rabbit-caught-in-the-headlights stare away from the prospect of dying and refocuses it to gaze on the value and the sheer luckiness of possessing life itself.

Part of this passage's genius, at least to my mind, is that it manages to do this - to value life over death - not by offering words of comfort, there are few words of comfort in that passage, but by offering a statement of defiance: life is not defined or undermined or defeated by death, it is the other way around. For Professor Dawkins it is life defines death, it's very existence defeats it, and it overcomes it.

Professor Dawkins isn't the first to express this sentiment of defiance. In an equally short piece of writing - 186 words - that we read this morning Mark, the Gospel writer, describes Jesus' resurrection, and by so doing he changed the course of human history by refocusing our attention away from death, and onto life.

Two things stand out about Mark's account of the resurrection: he clearly isn't writing a factual history, after all the resurrection appears in all four Gospels, and they all disagree on the details. Secondly, what stands out is that in this, Mark's account, Jesus doesn't make an appearance.

Perhaps, then, given that this isn't history and Jesus isn't present at the resurrection in Mark, the best way to read this resurrection account is to read it as a parable, a piece of beautiful writing. After all, in Mark's Gospel parables have been the primary way of conveying truth to readers and disciples alike. This resurrection account isn't a history of an event that happened in the past to someone who lived back then. It is a parable that affirms the truth that Jesus lives today, and that he is right about the message he preached when he lived back then. There was someone, Jesus, who was crucified and by being so he died, but that Jesus now lives and by doing so he is vindicated.

For those who first encountered this conviction that Jesus lives and that he is vindicated, it was a terrifying realisation. Salome, Mary of Magdala, and Mary the mother of James, those who had gone to the tomb early in the morning to anoint Jesus' body, were not only "beside themselves with terror," as Mark says, but more so, they were struck dumb by their fear, "They said nothing to anybody..."¹ Mark reports.

It wasn't the case that they had gone to the wrong tomb. Mark is very clear that the Marys had watched where Jesus' body had been laid. It wasn't the case that the body had been moved, that is why Mark describes the huge stone used to cover the tomb. What was the case, and what so astonished and terrified those who first went to the tomb, was that when they arrived at the right tomb, it was open, and it was empty.

If Jesus wasn't entombed, dead and defeated as they had expected him to be, then, as they are told, he must be somewhere in the world, alive, and vindicated. For those women and disciples who had been devastated by Jesus' death, it might seem natural that they should be delighted at this news. But, they are not; they are terrified. They are terrified because they saw Jesus crucified, they saw him buried, they saw the huge stone, and they believed that the consequence of death was defeat. Yet, now they are confronted with the fact that he is in the world, alive, and vindicated. What is the consequence of that?

Easter, in Mark's description of the resurrection, is not about an after-life, an assertion that we live on after we die. Easter is not about a happy ending. Easter is not a sentimental reflection on the way that winter turns to spring and life begins again. It has much more punch than that; it defiantly affirms that we can choose to live differently now, that the world and people's lives can be transformed, that

¹ Mark 16: 8

society, religion and politics can all be remade just as Jesus said that they could; and that this can happen despite the fact of death, even violent, humiliating, cruel death. The women run away terrified because this Jesus' death and entombment is no longer the end of Jesus' life and their as his first followers, now it is just the beginning.

As the man in the tomb tells them, "Fear nothing; you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He has been raised again; he is not here..."² The one who was apparently defeated by the lords of this world, has emerged victorious. As the first Christian communities proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord." "He is going on before you into Galilee; there you will see him..."³ he went on to say.

We are to go back to Galilee, back to where it all began, back to the beginning of the Gospel and live our lives in light of it. When we break bread in communion, when we join in fellowship as the church, Jesus' living body on earth, when our lives follow the way of Jesus' life, then Jesus is alive, we are his church his body on earth and this world does not have to be ruled by those who would reject his message of love, peace and merciful justice, who would manipulate this world for their selfish ends, who use violence to lord it over others. It can be ruled by him, by his life and message.

He was declared the Messiah by God, and then by his followers. He built relationships between God and people and between his followers by becoming vulnerable and powerless (because you don't build relationships by lording it over others). In his vulnerability and powerlessness he confronted the fear and death of the cross. Then when death entombed him, he left the tomb and he lives on, because as Richard Dawkins came to appreciate 2,000 years later we are not made for darkness and death, but for life.

It is life that is meaningful, so much so that it even gives meaning to death, so the empty tomb, and the fearful realisation that we can live as Jesus lived and change the world, defies those who would kill Jesus' life and vindicates the message that he brought.

In the empty tomb the women met a young man who was, Mark says, sitting on the right hand side of the tomb wearing a white robe. It was he who gave them the message that Jesus was not in the tomb, that he had been raised and had gone to Galilee. It is not the first time we have met an unknown, unnamed young man like this one. One appeared during the story of Jesus' Passion that we read last week.

*Then the disciples all deserted Jesus and ran away. Among those following was a young man with nothing on but a linen cloth. They tried to seize him; but he slipped out of the linen cloth and ran away naked.*⁴

² Mark 16: 6

³ Mark 16: 7

⁴ Mark 14:51

The question before you this morning is, who are you with? Are you with the young man who runs away in terror leaving Jesus and his good news of the loving, peaceful, mercifully Kingdom of God crucified, dead and defeated? Or, are you with the young man who says, "Fear nothing; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised again; he is not here... He is going on before you into Galilee; there you will see him..."⁵

Who are you with? The one who flees from death or the one who points to life?

⁵ Mark 16:6